

Report
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POLICIES AND TECHNIQUES OF PRESS RELATIONS

What is the organization for municipal news coverage? What procedures and methods are used to help newspapermen report city government news?

Good press relations are important to public officials as well as to industry and the professions. This report suggests ways of handling news from the city hall, and points out some of the techniques that leading men in public life have learned in working with newspaper reporters.

The newspaper reporter must operate according to certain rules of the newspaper publishing business as well as observing certain professional standards in his own work. First, newspaper reporting is a competitive job in any city with a radio station or two or more newspapers. Second, a newspaper reporter's job is to report. He is expected to take a disinterested attitude towards the information he gathers and to pursue his news leads zealously.

Third, the reporter uses his judgement as to what is important and unimportant in writing up stories for his paper, subject of course to being overruled by his city editor or managing editor. Fourth, the reporter is not a specialist. He may not understand the niceties of a capital improvement budget or a performance budget, and there is no reason why he should. He should however be able to report intelligently the broad principles and objectives of a particular program or activity that becomes city hall news.

Fifth, the reporter is writing for the general public. He often must boil down, condense, and oversimplify to write a story that is comprehensible to the average newspaper reader. Sixth, the reporter is primarily interested in what is new. He is looking for something that has a new angle, is timely, and will interest as many readers as possible. This does not preclude feature stories and human interest stories, but his main interest is the news story. He is certain to be much more interested in a heated city council meeting on public housing than he is in a city hall open house or other event no matter how well planned that event may be.

From the municipal officials' point of view, newspaper reporters sometimes show a lack of interest in and understanding of city hall problems. Perhaps the basic reason is failure to understand the principles and objectives of good municipal government. Stated another way reporters may not readily understand why certain activities of the city government are done in certain ways.

In addition to gaining a better understanding of the requirements of newspaper work, public officials should be careful to distinguish between newspaper reporting, as such, and city hall publicity. The annual report, the city hall open house, a municipal movie, tax leaflets, and radio programs, no matter how well planned and carried out still are not news in the strict sense of the word.

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The objective of city hall publicity principally is to stimulate citizen interest in municipal government. The reporter of course is interested principally in news that is timely and informative for a wide group of people; it does not necessarily have to be of educational value.

Organization for Municipal News Coverage. The chief administrator - mayor or city manager - is the chief source of information for news about the city government even though he may deliberately keep his name in the background as much as possible. The public relations officer, if so designated, should be an aide to the chief administrator rather than the head of a department of publicity.

Some centralization of news sources is desirable. The mayor or city manager can be this central news source, and, if more information is needed, the reporter can track it down by interviewing other employees and looking around for himself. Newspaper men stress the necessity of having a single, assigned and authoritative news source to avoid confusion, contradictory statements, and inconsistency.

Newspaper reporters quite naturally prefer to go to as few people as possible for a story; it saves time and leg work. When the releasing of news has been systematized, reporters will learn to go to the mayor or the city manager for important stories on city policy covering over-all phases of city business and to go to city department heads or other employees for stories on particular activities.

The chief administrator of course will refer reporters to other city officials and employees for stories as often as he can--first, because department heads may have more detailed information than the chief administrator has, and second, because the chief administrator must avoid giving any impression of censorship or of trying to prevent reporters from seeing department heads or other city employees.

The city clerk often can be a good contact between the city hall and newspaper reporters. His coverage of council meetings and the compilation of the council meeting calendar places him in an excellent position to acquire information on city affairs. The chief finance officer can be the source of news on tax collections, tax delinquencies, bond sales, and other finance news. The city engineer or public works director is a good source of information on street paving programs, the schedule for laying new sewer lines, and similar items.

One of the most important factors in developing a policy on press relations is not to overlook any news medium. In addition to one or more daily newspapers, city government news is of interest to radio and television stations, weekly newspapers in the area, and sometimes to newspapers in neighboring cities.

Developing News Items for the Press. A good newspaper reporter will use his own initiative and imagination in digging up as many stories as he can. Most city government news, however, will originate with city officials. The chief administrator should develop a sense of news values so that he can be as helpful as possible to reporters in providing news that is interesting and topical. There must be a story to tell. The item must have some general appeal, and the personal or human interest angle always is important. Names make a news story better, especially in smaller cities.

Only two kinds of news stories need concern city officials: the news story and the feature story. News stories usually are a matter of routine coverage by the reporter, and the most obvious example is the regular meetings of the city council. Other news stories may be developed on the reporter's own initiative as he hears of certain happenings which he considers important. Still other stories may be released by city officials through a prepared or "canned" news release or by use of a press conference. Feature stories usually are developed by reporters and city officials working together to describe some phase of the city government's day-to-day job. Both news and feature stories may be illustrated with photographs and accompanied by comment in the editorial column of the newspaper.

From the city's viewpoint it is wise to strike as much balance as possible in newspaper items so that not all stories are directed to one group of readers. In addition a balanced picture of city activities should be presented. The exploits of the fire department, for example, should not crowd out the worthy achievements of other city departments. Fire department news should not be suppressed, but other sources of good stories should be pointed out to reporters.

The chief administrator should be alert to possibilities for news and feature stories. With his intimate knowledge of the work of the city government, he often is in a better position than the reporter (who is an outsider) to spot good stories for the papers. Almost every phase of city government lends itself to news or feature treatment. Among those commonly written up in newspapers are the following:

1. New public works construction projects including bridges, streets, sewers, and street lighting.
2. Public addresses by city officials before service clubs, church groups, and other organizations.
3. Promotions and transfers of city employees and the names of new employees hired by the city.
4. The retirement of city employees, especially if there is a testimonial dinner with a citation or other ceremony.
5. Service awards and presentations to city employees.
6. Behind-the-scenes features of water plant operation, the city garage, a policeman on his beat, and other human interest activities.
7. Property tax collections and the percentage of collections to the total tax levy.

City Council News. One of the best sources of information on city government is the meetings of the city council. Almost all important decisions are made or ratified at council meetings including adoption of the budget, establishment of the tax levy, adoption of zoning and building codes, adoption of regulatory ordinances, purchase of city property, and so on.

Newspaper reporters should be given every chance to report accurately on legislative developments including ordinances and resolutions submitted but not

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yet adopted. Reporters also should have easy access to all possible information. The only exception is certain special information, such, for example, as the city manager's proposed budget, before it has been seen by the city council.

The city should do everything possible to make the reporter's job easier in covering city council meetings. The council meeting agenda or calendar should be prepared in advance and given to reporters at the same time it is distributed to council members. Adequate facilities should be provided for reporters at council meetings. They need good seats up front where they can see and hear, and it helps to have a room or space somewhere outside the council chamber where they can work and where a telephone is available. New reporters will need a seating chart or diagram of the council chamber so they can readily identify the members during the meeting.

A number of city councils provide citizens with an attractive folder for council meetings showing the names of councilmen and seating arrangement together with an organization chart of the city government, names of chief administrative officers, and a brief statement on city council procedure. Among cities that have prepared such folders or leaflets are Hayward and Los Angeles, Calif.; Bangor, Me.; Salem, Ore.; Kansas City, Mo.; Richmond, Va.; and Austin, Tex.

Most cities hold pre-council meetings or executive sessions just prior to the regular council meeting to discuss informally long-term projects and items scheduled for the formal public meeting. Reporters are permitted to attend these pre-council meetings with the understanding that no one can be quoted directly or indirectly. An alternative is to allow reporters to attend the meetings with the understanding that they cannot write up the session but are there merely to absorb background information so as to do a better job of reporting the regular public meetings of the city council.

A thorough discussion of city council organization and procedure is contained in MIS Report No. 72 (January, 1950).

The Techniques of Press Relations. These techniques are developed largely through understanding between city officials and newspaper men of the work of each group and a common interest in giving the public all possible information about the city. The following six points cover the major questions that will arise for most city officials.

1. Off-the-record Items. The chief administrator, city councilman, or other city official may be tempted to tell something to reporters and then ask that it be kept "off the record". In newspaper practice a remark cannot be taken "off the record" after it has been said; "off the record" only counts when it comes before the statement. The best way to handle off-the-record items is never to use them.

It is legitimate on the other hand to give information for background only. This is done to give the reporter better information for writing his story with the proviso that the city official shall not be named or quoted. The statement "no comment" has its place when a city official needs time to get the facts before answering a question or when a city official is in no position to comment. A city manager for example has no comment on a public dispute between city councilmen.

2. Press Releases. The chief administrator or one of his aides may prepare an occasional news release for the papers and radio stations, but these releases should be kept to a minimum. From the point of view of newspaper men, such releases should be prepared only on stories of important policies where misconceptions or misquotes may occur. In addition, a press release never should be the only source of news for an item.

Officials should be available for interviews, and reporters should have access to records and other information.

3. Press Conferences. In a formal sense these are seldom needed except in large cities. The mayor or city manager however should have a regular and convenient "press conference" time to see newspaper men. Reporters of course should not be denied admittance at any other time that they may come in.

4. Confidential Matters. No city government should attempt to hide anything. There will be a few confidential matters of a policy nature which cannot be disclosed at a given time. Newspaper reporters understand this. When a city official is asked for information about something which really is confidential, it is best to tell the reporter just that. Then the city official should explain why, the reasons for withholding the information, and the time at which the information will be made available. Reporters will respect confidences if there is reasonable justification for withholding the information and if it is understood that the information will be made available later.

5. Handling Unfavorable News. A city official can be faced at any time with news that is unfavorable and can loosely be called "bad publicity". There is only one way to handle it -- give reporters access to all information and get the news into the papers as quickly as possible so that both the reporters and the public will forget about it. No attempt should be made to conceal the news; reporters eventually will get the story anyway.

6. City Hall Publicity. As part of a good municipal public relations program, the chief administrator will want to issue an annual municipal report, tax leaflets, and other reports for the public. These public relations devices should be considered as means of publicity to inform citizens and to increase their understanding of the city government. There should be no surprises for reporters in any of these publications, and no attempt should be made to compete with newspapers and radio stations as a source of news about the city government. If a tax leaflet, for example, will contain information on the tax rate and tax levy, this information should be given to the newspapers before the leaflet is published.

Conclusion. This report can best be summarized by abstracting the points made by Hal Hazelrigg in an article, "A Newspaper Man Looks at City Hall," that appeared in the March, 1938 issue of Public Management. The positive steps the chief administrator should take for good press relations are the following:

1. Establish a clearly defined and systematic policy for press relations.
2. Confer with editors and reporters of local newspapers on how best to clear the news for their convenience.
3. Arrange a convenient, regular "press conference" time to see reporters, although of course reporters would be seen at any other time.

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4. Develop a "nose for news" and suggest good stories to reporters.
5. Avoid "off-the-record" statements.
6. Distribute news breaks evenly between morning and evening newspapers.
7. Ignore petty criticisms in newspapers so long as general press relations are good.
8. Ask editors for a chance to answer critical "letters-to-the editor" in the same column printing such letters.
9. Issue annual reports and other publicity that are designed for public reading, have an attractive format, and are well and simply written.
10. On major public reports, make material available to reporters from time to time before the report itself is actually published; point out to reporters the significance of more complicated passages in these reports and interpret them so reporters can write accurate and intelligent stories.
11. Point out the possibilities for feature stories and help reporters get pictures for such stories.
12. Prepare releases only on stories of important policy where misconceptions or misquotes might occur.
13. Look upon the newspaper as an effective instrument for accounting to the public.